

It was a very busy summer

by Bill Kent

Please excuse me, but I'm still catching my breath from all the activity that took place on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge this summer. It was an amazing summer.

Our cabin and trail crews spent the summer working to improve trail access and rehabilitate cabins throughout the Refuge, and performed more meaningful work than I ever expected to see in one Alaska summer. The same can be said for the Youth Conservation Corps, which consists of local high school students performing needed maintenance work at a variety of locations. These paid crews were supplemented by three volunteer high school crews from the Student Conservation Association, who worked on trails in the Skilak Loop and along Swanson River and Swan Lake Roads. Add to this, the Refuge maintenance folks have been working on a new Environmental Education building at Refuge Headquarters.

Refuge cabin crews completed construction of three new public use cabins. Each of the 16' x 18' log cabins includes bunks, a picnic table, wood stove, and outhouse. The new cabins, located on McLain, Snag, and Upper Ohmer Lakes, respectively, will be available on a first-come-first-serve basis for the rest of this year, but starting in 2005 they will be available only via a reservation and fee.

In addition to the new cabins, we renovated eleven older public use or historical cabins, including replacement of roofs, sill and wall logs, windows, bunks, stoves, and outhouses as needed. Many of these older cabins will also be available for public use via a reservation in 2005. Gary Titus and his crew performed excellent work on these cabins; I hope you take the opportunity to stay in one of them in the future.

Scott Slavik, backcountry ranger for the Refuge, reports significant accomplishments in trail upgrades and improvements on many of the Refuge's 200 miles of hiking, canoe, and horse trails. All road-accessible trails and canoe system portages were cleared of beetle-kill deadfall, and improvements were also made on remote routes near Cottonwood Creek, Surprise Creek, and Lake Emma. The Doc Pollard, Hanson, and Funny River horse trails were cleared for the first four miles of each trail. Re-routes that were necessary be-

cause of flooding, erosion, or recent fires have been completed on Skyline, Bear Mountain, Kenai River, and Cottonwood Creek Trails. Scott will be evaluating the impact of the Glacier Creek fire on the Emma Lake/Indian Creek trail and will determine what is needed to re-open this trail next spring.

New timber bridges have been placed on several routes, including the popular Seven Lakes Trail, and an improved route from Jim's Landing to the Visitor Contact Station has also been completed.

Much of the cabin, trail and campground work was accomplished with a special one-time appropriation from Congress, in recognition of the fact that the refuge has an estimated 2.5 million visitors each year.

Three Student Conservation Association High School work crews supplemented Scott's backcountry trail crew. These young people, all volunteers from across the U.S., worked on trails along the Skilak Loop, Swanson River, and Swan Lake Roads.

The Youth Conservation Corp (YCC) crew, consisting of seven local high school students ages 15 to 17, finished their summer work at Refuge on August 6. Beginning in June, YCCers completed a wide range of Refuge projects including painting, brush clearing, trail maintenance, camp site clean up, and habitat protection. They worked on the Keen Eye Trail, Visitor Contact Station, Outdoor Education Center, Engineer Lake Campground, Ski Hill Road, the Swanson River Canoe System, Russian River access area, Hidden Creek Trail, and Moose Research Center. They also participated in a variety of safety and skills training. This program carries out valuable public lands management work while exposing local youth to conservation career opportunities.

The Russian River Ferry, operated as a concession contract for the Refuge, finished the 2004 season on September 7, pulling the ferryboat out of the Kenai River until next year. The non-motorized "current driven" ferry transported 32,314 people across the Kenai River to fish the confluence area of the Kenai and Russian Rivers during 2004, up from 27,481 passengers in 2003. The Ferry contractor, Alaska Recreation Management, Inc., also handled the parking for 11,333 vehicles and the launching of 1,693 boats. Ap-

proximately two-thirds of the visitors to the Russian River area were Alaska residents, with the remainder from all over the world. We consider the contractor to be an excellent ambassador for Alaska and the Kenai Refuge, and appreciate their good work.

Our Visitor Contact Station at the east end of the Skilak Loop road answered questions for more than 12,000 visitors: another 20,000 people came through the Refuge Visitor Center on Ski Hill Road. There were also almost 1,000 participants in interpretive programs at campgrounds and the Refuge Headquarters.

If you have driven on Swanson River and/or Swan Lake Roads, you have seen a major facility rehabilitation project underway this summer. D&L Construction of Soldotna is the contractor for this project, which will provide additional parking at nine trailheads, upgrade the camping areas at Rainbow Lake Swanson River Landing, and Fish Lake. New vault toilets have been installed at Fish Lake, Merganser Lake, and at both entrances to the Swan Lake Canoe Trails. There is also a new Visitor Orientation kiosk on Swanson River Road just as you enter the Refuge, near the

Sunken Island Road intersection. A new scenic overlook at mile 11 of Swan Lake Road has been constructed, and provides a great view of the lowlands north of the road.

The 2004 field season also accounted for a record number of volunteers and hours of contributed volunteer work. Our files show that 121 people, from teenagers to young-at-hearts in their 70s, contributed 20,047 hours of labor at the Refuge. This compares to 119 volunteers working 17,037 hours in 2003 and 67 volunteers putting in 9,669 hours in 2002. The 2004 volunteers worked on biological studies, environmental education, trail work, and served as campground hosts.

As I said at the beginning, it was a very busy summer for the Visitor Services Division on Kenai Refuge. I hope you take the opportunity to get out on the Refuge and enjoy the fruits of all this summer work.

Bill is the Kenai Refuge Supervisory Park Ranger and lives in Sterling. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.